



April 1, 2012

Palm Sunday of the Lord's Passion

"They pressed into service a passer-by, Simon...to carry his cross"—Mark 15:21

Dear Friends:

The cross is not jewelry that we wear as a talisman, nor is it a piece of art to hang on the wall of home or church. The cross is something that we carry in us and it is something that we help others to carry. The cross is a metaphor for our world's brokenness.

One of the crosses we carry and inflict on one another is warfare. Too often people glorify and romanticize it, especially in the lead-up to war. But in reality when nations must resort to war it is not glorious it is hideous. No matter how just the cause, the act of war means that somewhere there has been a failure.

War should always be the last and reluctant course of action. It should be entered with a sense of sorrow. Those who will carry the cross of war, soldier and civilian, friend and enemy, will be marked by it for ever. War is always tragic. Recently, we have seen that tragic side in reports from Afghanistan. The Jesuit periodical *America* (April 2, 2012) had an editorial on the killings in Kandahar that I want to share for your reflection on this Palm Sunday.

In the early morning of March 11 a U.S. staff sergeant walked off base in Kandahar, Afghanistan, and began a rampage that would end in the deaths of 16 civilians, including three women and nine children. It is too soon to say precisely what provoked this murderous attack, but it is well past time to ask if the paradigm of the "volunteer professional" as the foundation for the contemporary U.S. armed services may be nearing a breakdown. The current personnel structure of the U.S. military relies on an unprecedented number of combat tours by service members. The assailant had already completed three tours of duty in Iraq, during which he suffered a brain injury, and was beginning yet another combat tour, this time in Afghanistan.

How many days in combat can any single individual endure before trauma and stress begin to diminish mental health or dislodge his or her moral compass? The military's overdependence on a small pool of service members is clearly taking a toll on these individuals and their families. The dreadful events in Kandahar suggest that even more gruesome collateral damage may be attributable to the military's multi-tour rotation system.

The nation is faced with a stark choice: find a way to expand the military so that the same men and women are not repeatedly deployed into combat, most likely through a draft; or find a way to advance U.S. geopolitical interests without leaning so heavily on military power. Perhaps both options complement each other. The possibility of a truly shared sacrifice ensured by universal conscription may be enough to discourage an over reliance on war-making in U.S. statecraft.

Today let us reflect on the cross which Christ carries and on which he is hung in all our sisters and brothers. How might we help lift those crosses and transform them by love? We might start by not glorifying war and renouncing violence as a means to solving our problems. Let us become like Christ who did not return violence for violence, rather he returned love and forgiveness. Lord Jesus have mercy on us!

Peace

Fr Ron